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Congress of the United States
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Washington, DC 20515-0913

December 1, 2020

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The Honorable Rickey "R.D." James
Assistant Secretary of the Army for Civil Works
U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
108 Army Pentagon
Washington, DC 20310

Dear Assistant Secretary James,

I write today to bring your attention to an urgent issue in my district. As you know, Pinellas County is home to a large shore protection project that encompasses nearly 13 miles of beaches over three segments and has been a model partnership between the federal, state, and local governments. This public safety project is vital to our economy, environment, and way of life. Our beaches support a thriving tourism industry; promote recreational opportunities; and protect lives, endangered local wildlife, and infrastructure from devastating storm surge. It is imperative that the Pinellas County Shore Protection Project remain on schedule for years to come.

Despite completing multiple nourishment cycles over several decades, the Army Corps informed Pinellas County that local officials must obtain perpetual easements along the length of the project from 100 percent of property owners in order to be eligible for Sand Key's next nourishment in 2024. Together with the Corps' Jacksonville District, the County and local municipalities have been working hard for over two years to obtain these easements. Unfortunately, due to understandable skepticism from some property owners, the County remains more than 270 easements short of meeting the requirement. Notably, a majority of the remaining required easements are located well into the sand dunes and would not receive any sand in the planned project (see Attachment A).

The Corps had initially given the County until the spring of 2021 to acquire the remaining easements. However, the County shared with my office that they were recently informed by the Corps that the deadline has been moved up to the end of this calendar year. While this shortened timeframe is concerning on its own, the ongoing public health emergency makes it even more difficult for the County to conduct outreach and engage with property owners.

This situation has been further exacerbated by Tropical Storm Eta, which made landfall just north of Tampa Bay on November 12th. Early reports from the County indicate that the beach project suffered considerable damage, resulting in a loss of over 370,000 cubic yards of sand from the storm and may need emergency repairs. Unfortunately, without the required easements, those repairs would also be in jeopardy, making an already dire situation even worse.

Degradation of our beaches would severely impact our tourism-based economy, and the lack of a protective beach will cause even greater damage to local infrastructure when a storm occurs. This would lead to increased disaster recovery costs for everyone involved – directly

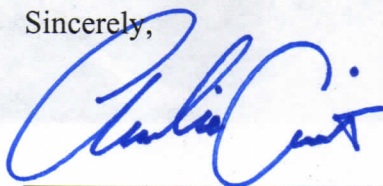
contradicting the very purpose of the program. Most alarming, however, is the threat to human life and safety that a malnourished beach poses.

It is unacceptable that the Pinellas County Shore Protection Project be abandoned due to a sudden change in Corps policy, especially after completing multiple successful nourishment cycles prior to instatement of the easement requirement. For this reason, I urge the Corps to provide flexibility to Pinellas County and not require easements for areas where sand will not be placed in the planned project, or has not been placed since 1996, the year the Corps released guidance on WDRA 1986. These modifications would greatly assist in ensuring this critical project continues uninterrupted and allows for any emergency replenishments that may be required prior to the next scheduled project.

For your awareness, my office has also reached out directly to your staff to arrange a virtual meeting between the appropriate officials at Corps Headquarters, the County, and me to discuss this issue. I request that you also attend this meeting.

Thank you for your attention to this matter. Given the seriousness of the situation, I ask for your reply by December 8, 2020.

Sincerely,



Charlie Crist
UNITED STATES CONGRESSMAN

CC: Colonel Andrew Kelly, Commander and District Engineer, Jacksonville District
Collin Ries, Coastal Engineer, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers

Attachment A:



Charlie Crist
UNITED STATES CONGRESSMAN

CC: Colonel Andrew Kelly, Commander and District Engineer, Jacksonville District
Collin Rice, Coastal Engineer, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers